

'A dream' Quinceanera

DCF helps 15-year-old girl celebrate Hispanic tradition

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NEWTOWN -- As lovely as her first name is, Jocelyn Iraheta prefers to be called by another name.

"Gabby," says the 15-year-old, who has straight brown hair and bright brown eyes. The name is a shortened form of her middle name, Gabriela.

Today Gabby will take part in something she didn't think was possible for her just a few years ago -- the celebration of a Hispanic tradition called the Quinceanera. It is being sponsored by the state's Department of Children and Families with the help of St. Joseph College in West Hartford.



Foster parent Jennifer Sawyer Karnoff, left, learns how to make Salvadoran pupusa, a thick, hand-made corn tortilla that is usually stuffed with cheese, chicken, or refried beans, with Jocelyn Gabriela Iraheta, 15, who is originally from El Salvador and is now living with Karnoff in Newtown.

"It's like a dream," said Gabby about taking part in the celebration. "It's my dream and everybody has a dream."

Gabby is from El Salvador in Central America, and a Quinceanera is held in Spanish-speaking countries when a girl turns 15 to mark her passage from childhood to young womanhood. It is somewhat like a Sweet 16 party here but has several traditional rituals and is much more elaborate.

For many young Hispanic girls, whether here or in Spanish-speaking countries, a Quinceanera is not unexpected. But for Gabby Iraheta, a Quinceanera celebration seemed unlikely.

In 2005 she came from El Salvador to stay with relatives in the Danbury area after her mother died. But the situation didn't work out, and she was placed in the care of the state's Department of Children and Families.

"I never thought I'd have one (Quinceanera) when I came here," said Gabby in her sometimes uncertain English. "But maybe."

That "maybe" turned into reality.

In January -- just six days after she turned 15 on Jan. 12 -- Gabby became the foster child of Jennifer Sawyer Karnoff and Robert Karnoff, who live in the Sandy Hook section of Newtown.

"Rachel was the driving force," says Sawyer Karnoff about her 12-year-old biological daughter. "She wanted a sister."

Sawyer Karnoff, who is a clinical social worker at Yale-New Haven Hospital, adds her own feelings about an addition to the family. "I felt like we were not complete without another child."

The Karnoffs were licensed by DCF as a foster home in the fall of last year.

"I knew this would be the placement, knew this is it," says Janet Stallworth, the DCF social worker assigned to Gabby, about her living with the Karnoffs.

The reason Stallworth felt the Karnoffs were the right match for Gabby -- now a sophomore at Newtown High School -- was the type of questions Sawyer Karnoff was asking. "She was asking about the child."

Sawyer Karnoff wanted to know what Gabby liked to do, her background, how she felt emotionally.

In the spring, with the support of the Karnoffs, Gabby wrote an essay as a first step toward taking part in a new program offered by DCF to the Hispanic girls in its care. The department was holding its first annual Quinceanera celebration, preceded by a series of workshops to help the participating girls face their future as young women.

"We walked them through thinking about their passage from adolescence to young adulthood," said Fernando Muniz, a program director with DCF and a co-chair of the planning committee for the Quinceanera, about the workshops.

Workshops for the 14 girls chosen to take part -- including Gabby -- have been held every other week since late May at St. Joseph College. The topics included leadership development, life skills development, encouragement of secondary and post secondary educational goals, and cultural awareness.

Aside from being Hispanic, Muniz said the girls come from varied backgrounds. Some are recent arrivals to the United States, some are second- and third-generation Americans. Their families are from countries including Cuba and the Dominican Republic, as well as the U.S. Commonwealth of Puerto Rico.

An important part of the program, Muniz said, is to help girls learn "what it means to be a young Hispanic in the U.S."

Sawyer Karnoff agrees. "It helps them feel good about themselves not only as people but also as Hispanic young women."

The workshops also include learning to waltz for the Quinceanera. One of the traditions in the celebration is for the girl to dance -- usually a waltz -- with her father.

For today's Quinceanera, Gabby and the other 13 girls also will do a waltz. But Muniz describes it as a "modified waltz," because the 14 girls will do the dance together.

Other Quinceanera traditions will be followed in today's celebration, including a religious service to start the day's events at the chapel at St. Joseph College.

Another Quinceanera ritual is the presentation to the girl of her first set of high-heeled shoes by her father.

"At the chapel," Muniz said, "the girls will have their slippers on and then a person they choose will give them their first high heels."

A fancy gown is also a Quinceanera tradition, and DCF is providing each of the girls with one.

Gabby's eyes light up when she talks about her gown. It's floor length, strapless and full at the bottom. On her head, and the heads of all the girls, will be another Quinceanera tradition -- a tiara.

The dinner and dance reception will be at the Connecticut Convention Center in Hartford and about 175 people are expected to attend, most of them the foster families, friends and relatives of the 14 girls.

Though the Quinceanera ends today for Gabby and the 13 other girls, elements of the program will continue. Each girl received an adult mentor whom she will keep seeing for at least a year, and Muniz said the girls also "jelled as a group" and have developed a bond.

"It was a wonderful, wonderful by-product of Quinceanera," said Muniz about the friendships they formed.

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